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ABSTRACT

A systematic review of the nine volumes of "Research in the Teaching of English" published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) since 1967 reflects trends of relative importance in various areas of investigation. It is probably true that more research effort is directed toward the secondary level than the college level, more toward composition than literature, and more toward reading than non-print media. Similarly, descriptive research is more common than experimental research. The fact that most research is performed by university professors and graduate students rather than by Secondary English instructors reflects the traditional schism between the researcher and the practitioner. If, in addition at the long-range study of common and continuing educational issues, research also involves the secondary school teacher and is designed to answer specific questions within the teaching environment, this gulf may be bridged. (KS)

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RESEARCH IN THE TEACHING OF SECONDARY ENGLISH: ACTUALITY AND POTENTIAL

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In the spring of 1967, the National Council of Teachers of English published the first issue of Research in the Teaching of English. A systematic review of the nine complete volumes that have been published to date provide background for some of the things I wish to say about research and evaluation as they relate to the teaching of English at the secondary level.

The first nine volumes of RTE contain 129 articles, excluding regular features, such as book reviews, bibliographies, and letters to the editor. Forty-one, or approximately one-third, of these articles deal with various aspects of teaching English at the secondary level. Less that one-fourth (29) deal with the teaching of English at the college level.

Seven of the 41 articles on secondary English deal primarily with curriculum and materials, 11 with teaching methods, four with evaluation methods, and 18 with pupil characteristics (abilities, attitudes, etc.); the other five articles deal with various combinations of concerns related to the teaching of English. Categorized another way, nine articles deal with various aspects of language, 10 with literature, and 14 with composition (a few deal with combinations of these topics). Four articles focus on reading, while only one focuses on non-print media. Likewise, only one article deals with drama.

While the studies reported represent a variety of research designs, almost half (20) of them can be classified as basically descriptive (including analytic comparison). About one-third of the remainder (14) are experimental or quasi-experimental. Only two articles report case studies.

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More than two-thirds of the studies (28) were reported by a single author, and over three-fourths (33) were written by people affiliated with colleges and universities. Only six articles (about 15% of the total) were written by people affiliated with secondary schools.

Although there are several journals that publish reports of research related to the teaching of English, it seems unlikely that the total picture is very different from that reflected in the data presented above. A search of ERIC materials would provide a more nearly complete picture of research activity, but in the absence of such information an incomplete description can serve useful purposes. It is probably true that more research effort is directed toward the secondary level than the college level, more toward composition than literature, and more toward reading than non-print media. Probably there is more descriptive research than experimental; and although the number of case studies is increasing, they are still relatively rare. It is probably also true that most of the research is done by university professors and graduate students; it would be surprising to me if more than 15 or 20% of the total research related to English teaching is done by secondary school teachers and supervisors.

Anyone who cares enough to invest sufficient time and money can obtain more accurate quantitative data than I have given on the current status of research in the teaching of English at the secondary level. But the more important question of what influence research has on what is taught in English classes and how it is taught probably cannot be accurately answered. Nevertheless, answers to this question and the broader question of what influence research has on the teaching of any subject at any level are frequently given in negative terms. James R. Squire (1976) probably represents a minority viewpoint when he insists that research can make a difference. He says:

> One of the more imperishable myths of American education is that research has had little or no impact on the nature and quality of education in this country. Despite the continuous outpouring of monographs, leaflets, and pamphlets on "What Research says," a large number of teachers continue to insist that the findings of educational research make very little difference in changing the classroom instruction (p.63).

To support his contention "that on the long, hard, never-ending trail to improvement of education, research does play an important role," Squire offers two illustrations, First, he cites the influence of studies undertaken during the early twenties by Arthur Gates. These studies resulted in "the basal reader approach" which was used for decades in elementary schools throughout the country and by which millions of Americans learned to read. He also cites the whole body of studies of reading interests of young people which have been conducted by various researchers over a long period of time, studies which taken together have exerted a pervasive influence on the choices of titles by teachers, librarians, and publishers. Squire states his belief that:

> These two illustrations suggest one phenomenon about the impact of research on education--that the most apparent influence results over the long run from the continued impact of a large number of related studies that seem to point in the same direction, studies that tend to change the attitudes of educational leaders and ultimately teachers, studies that ultimately become translated into practical, manageable ideas, techniques, or materials that seem to assist the teacher in the classroom or which result in classroom experience which support the teacher's role (p. 64).

Squire also comments on the long-range impact of the various studies of children's language and studies of response to literature. He concludes that: "Research then has made a difference, does make a difference, and will make a difference."

I agree in general with Squire's central point that one should not look for immediate changes resulting from a single research study, but

rather for the long-range impact of an entire body of research. At the same time, I keep wishing there were some means by which the results of research could be brought to bear more directly and immediately on the teaching of English. Perhaps I am wishing in vain, but two journal articles I have recently read raise that wish almost to the level of hope.

The more recently published of the two is an article by Lee Odell (1976) in the January issue of English Journal on "The Classroom Teacher as Researcher." Odell begins by acknowledging that for some teachers research is almost a dirty word. He admits that these teachers have some justification for their claim that much research has no apparent bearing on the complex problems they deal with in their classrooms. He says a lot of research fails to answer such reasonable questions as:

> Now that I know whatever it is that you learned from your research, what good will it do me? How is it going to help me be a better teacher? How is it going to help my students?

Odell recognizes the fact that these are difficult questions, but he suggests that they can be answered and answered well enough to encourage teachers at all levels to engage in research. His reasons for this suggestion are based on his assumption that the processes of research are similar to the processes we engage in when we teach effectively. We make inferences about what is going on in our classrooms, we compare our inferences with our expectations about what ought to be going on, and we formulate questions about ways to more effectively influence what will be going on. These questions suggest new approaches to try, and as we try new approaches, we continue to examine our students' performance. According to Odell:

> This process of continually formulating and answering questions. . . is the essence of good teaching. It is also the essence of one important kind of research, one that can be done by most experienced teachers. This sort of research does not require elaborate statistical analysis or carefully matched control groups. What it does require is (1) a clear statement of a problem, based on a close look at students'

> written and spoken language; (2) an attempt to solve the problem that has been formulated; and (3) a careful analysis of students' work to see if students are in fact making the desired changes in their speaking, writing, listening, or reading (p. 106).

Odell goes on to offer what appear to be practical suggestions for planning, conducting, and interpreting the results of research clearly related to the daily activities of teachers.

When I first read Odell's article, I was inclined to regard it as another well-intentioned, but probably futile, effort to convince teachers that research really is worthwhile. I often make a similar pitch in the research course I teach, but I have little reason to think it changes the attitudes and behavior of many of my students. It seemed unlikely that another journal article would make much difference.

Upon further reflection, however, I believe Odell's suggestions have potential for the realization of my hope for more immediate and direct impact of research on teaching. My belief is based in part on one of the articles I read in preparing my profile of the first nine volumes of Research in the Teaching of English. Written by Arthur M. Cohen (1973), the article demonstrates that the gap between researcher and teacher really can be bridged. Although the study involved junior college students and instructors, I think it has implications for research and evaluation at the secondary level.

Cohen comments on the gulf that exists between English teachers and institutional researchers charged with validating placement procedures and assessing the efficacy of teaching techniques. Since curriculum questions are sometimes decided on the basis of tests that measure attainment of only part of the goals of English courses, he thinks teachers have reason to be suspicious. Therefore, he says:

> If the researcher expects the instructors to attend to his findings, to change their procedures accordingly--or even to acquiesce to his collecting data directly from their students--the instructors must be convinced that his research design is valid in their terms. They must understand the design, believe it will aid their own instructional operations, yield data of use to them (p. 357).

With these considerations in mind, Cohen worked with 21 English teachers from 14 junior colleges. Together they worked out an acceptable research design, developed a scoring key, selected topics on which their students would write and committed themselves to conducting an investigation of their students' ability to write compositions.

The study was designed to measure changes in three variables related to written composition: content, organization, and mechanics. Gains from pre-test to post-test were significant on both content and organization. Cohen concluded that the design they used was appropriate for assessing change in students' ability to write compositions. I agree with Cohen when he says:

> More important, perhaps, the investigation demonstrates that it is possible to involve English instructors in the actual conduct of a learning study and still obtain results the researcher would find respectable. In fact, with minimal coordination, instructors themselves can conduct studies using this design (p. 369).

I have no way of verifying it, but my guess is that those 21 teachers were better teachers as a result of their participation in the research study. The experience of formulating a research problem, developing an evaluation instrument, and interpreting the results of the study undoubtedly heightened their awareness of the relationship between good research and good teaching. If my guess is correct, the study Cohen reports is an example of a research study that had an immediate impact on the classroom practices of 21 English teachers.

I think I am not being too idealistic in hoping that other teachers, especially teachers of Secondary English, can become involved in research designed to answer questions that are significant to them. If so, in addition to the long-range impact of studies focusing on common and continuing concerns, there will be more immediate and direct impact of research on teaching, the impact of research designed to answer specific questions of importance in specific teaching situations. Perhaps, then, instead of 15 or 20% of the research in English teaching being done by secondary school people, a much greater proportion might be done by them. I think that might be a salutary change.

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